

PASSAIC COUNTY

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

**ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT
AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

2007

Freeholder Health, Education & Community Services Committee

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Assessment

This plan has been developed by the Passaic County Department of Health to identify the most salient environmental issues within Passaic County and to propose a plan to address these issues for calendar year 2007. The Passaic County Department of Health is a county health program that derives authority pursuant to New Jersey Statutes Annotated 26:3A2-21 *et seq*, and is the certified local agency for the provision of environmental health services within Passaic County under the auspices of the County Environmental Health Act (CEHA).

The Community

Geographic, as well as social and economic, characteristics of a county relate directly to the environmental health needs within that county. Passaic County spans an area of northeastern New Jersey that begins a few miles east of New York City and extends up to the New York State border. The geographical area of Passaic County resembles the shape of a "tilted hour glass" and encompasses approximately 199.54 square miles. This unique shape essentially divides the county into two distinct areas: a southeastern section and a northwestern section. This creates two very different environments: an urban environment in the southeastern section that transforms to a rural environment in the northwestern section. Approximately 500,427 (2004, Census Bureau) people live in Passaic County, with the population concentrations being highest in the southeastern section, and falling off as one moves from southeast to northwest.

While there is some consistency between the types of environmental issues that exist in both geographical sections, there are also distinctly different concerns that arise in each section. For example, the urban areas are served by existing infrastructure to deliver drinking water and collect wastewater. Most of this infrastructure is dated, and when failure occurs, there is impact to the public health and the environment. Conversely, the rural areas tend to be supplied drinking water by wells and have on-site wastewater disposal systems. These systems are susceptible to groundwater contamination and are responsible for causing contamination at times. Also, the urbanized areas are more prone to air and noise pollution problems, and all areas have solid waste and hazardous materials/waste issues.

The urban environment in the southeast of the county houses a diverse community, with the remaining portions of the county having less ethnic diversity. Passaic County has a population that is 75 percent Caucasian, 15 percent African American, 4 percent Asian American and the remaining portions split between various other races. Hispanic Americans comprise 32 percent of the population, which may be split between Caucasian and African American races. The median income for Passaic County is \$50,284, with 7 percent of people below the poverty level.

Local Environmental Issues

Due to the demographic diversity in Passaic County, portions of the county split between urban, suburban and rural, there are numerous environmental issues that arise. Unfortunately, due to the demographic diversity there are no single issues that pervade Passaic County as an entire entity. Environmental quality in all areas of concern must be monitored, assessed and maintained.

Air Quality

As New Jersey is a state that struggles with meeting ambient air quality standards, air quality is an important quality to all counties. However, in the northeastern section of the state, including Bergen, Essex, Hudson and Passaic counties, the daily air quality estimates are seldom better than moderate air quality, with many days in borderline dangerous to dangerous air quality estimates, especially during the summer months. Ozone alert days particularly impact the northeastern “urbanized” areas of New Jersey.

Air quality is an issue of concern that results in numerous complaints. The nature of the majority of complaints involves odors. A constant effort is made to respond to all odor complaints in as timely a manner as possible. Many odor complaints entail a temporal component, placing prompt response at a premium. However, missed opportunities to verify odor complaints due to temporal constraints remains a source of consternation for many complainants. Cross training of a larger portion of our inspectors for this activity is a priority to provide for as prompt a response as possible. Currently, only one inspector is awaiting an opportunity to attend this training.

Primary focus for Air Inspections is expected to be on gasoline service stations as plans to require air inspection along with each underground storage tank has been proposed by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. Balances on the Air Inspections is anticipated to be split between dry cleaners and auto body shops.

Hazardous Materials Response

Hazardous materials response is a service that requires continuing attention in Passaic County. The pervasive presence of industry through most of the county provides a constant potential of hazardous materials incidents. Passaic County has an extensive hazardous materials response structure comprised of Passaic County Department of Health, Passaic County Sheriff’s Department, Clifton Fire Department – Hazardous Materials Team and Wayne Fire Department – Hazardous Materials Team. Active and potential hazardous materials incidents are quickly assessed and controlled.

An interlocal agreement for Hazardous Materials Response was establish in 2005 with Passaic County Operations Department. Passaic County Operations Department will function at a Level II Operations Level to provide defensive actions such as placing absorbent material on road ways.

In addition, with increased focus on emergency preparedness and potential terrorism events, hazardous materials response becomes an increased area of focus. The Passaic County Department of Health has an established team working on Bioterrorism Preparedness through a grant from the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. This work is performed in cooperation with the Passaic County Office of Emergency Management and Passaic County Sheriff’s Department. The primary response mechanism for terrorism and bioterrorism events is through the all hazards approach. All incidents regardless of their origin are addressed as hazardous materials incidents. In Passaic County is the hazardous materials response team that is cooperatively run by the Passaic County Sheriff’s Department and the Passaic County Department of Health is in the forefront of addressing any incidents that occur. Any potential implications from the incident being caused by terrorist actions will be assessed during the incident and appropriate additional resources allocated to investigate the action and mitigate any threats. Further efforts will continue to be performed to provide

increased amounts of planning and preparedness to increase the ability of Passaic County to address any potential terrorism events.

Underground Storage Tanks

There have been some incidents of significant impacts to groundwater from discharges from underground storage tanks in recent history. A notable occurrence is a recent case of a plume of MTBE contamination impacting public and private drinking wells in Ringwood. Passaic County intends to devote greater efforts toward measures to prevent groundwater contamination from leaking underground storage tanks.

The Passaic County Department of Health has been chosen to participate in a program to provide a funded position to allow for the inspection of all regulated underground storage tank systems on a regular basis. This will help identify any problems that may be occurring with the tank systems. Early identification of the problems will help prevent any discharges from spreading to neighboring properties and causing impacts to soil and groundwater.

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Underground Storage Tank Program has begun to enforce stricter regulations concerning the inspectors whom perform these inspections. A state course is now required and a state test at the end of this course must be passed with a 75 or better before an environmental inspector is allowed to perform an underground storage tank inspection. Training in the field with state inspectors must also be completed and the state inspectors must feel that the inspector is capable of performing these inspections before the inspector is allowed to inspect a gas station by themselves. This ensures the state that the county inspectors are knowledgeable and capable to perform an underground storage tank inspection.

The primary inspector assigned to this program has left for another opportunity, forcing the Passaic County Department of Health to adapt with inspections by other personnel until further training can be obtained for the inspector that will be primarily assigned to this program.

Water Quality

The Passaic County Department of Health continues to devote attention to water quality issues. Safe Drinking Water Inspections of public non-community wells help to identify threats to public health and ground water quality by ensuring that water supplied to the public by small private wells servicing restaurants, apartments, schools and institutions are performing the required test and meeting standards for the water provided. Surface water issues are investigated and addressed appropriately. Many surface water issues overlap into the area of hazardous materials response when surface waters are impacted by discharges hazardous materials.

The Passaic County Health Department also ensures the safety of residential wells under the Private Well Testing Act. A residential well is required to be tested as a condition of real estate transactions. These wells must undergo sampling for Iron, Manganese, pH, Total Coliform, Nitrate, Lead, and Volatile Organic Compounds. If there is an exceedance in any of the drinking water standards the Passaic County Health Department works with the local health department that the residence is located in and a public notice is issued to the area approximately 1000 feet around the contaminated well. The notice does not include specific

information about the well site. This helps to alert the property owner when the well fails any tests and the surrounding area without giving out which well is contaminated.

Resources and Partnerships

Passaic County has an established cooperative program for public and environmental health. Interlocal agreements formalize the cooperative work plans for hazardous materials response involving Passaic County Department of Health, Passaic County Sheriff's Department, Clifton Fire Department – Hazardous Materials Team and Wayne Fire Department – Hazardous Materials Team. Passaic County Health Department has an Interlocal agreement with Clifton Health Department to assist in performing investigations of certain types of environmental complaints in the City of Clifton. A Government Public Health Partnership has been established to oversee the cooperative relationships of the municipal health departments; private health services providers and the Passaic County Department of Health.

A continuing issue for the CEHA program of the Passaic County Department of Health has been staffing. Over the past year, there have been several reallocations of staff to new duties and several staff member who have left to pursue other opportunities. The work of a CEHA inspector is physically and mentally challenging. Experience is one of the important qualities a CEHA inspector needs to call upon. However, minimal funding from the state does not allow for salaries to be competitive enough to ensure that CEHA inspectors will stay with the Passaic County Department of Health for periods long enough to accumulate experience. The Passaic County Department of Health struggles to maintain qualified and experienced staff in this atmosphere.

Conclusions

The Passaic County Department of Health will continue to address all environmental issues in the County of Passaic based on the parameters provided for it by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. The Passaic County Department of Health continues to strive to improve its services to community in all areas with available resources.